DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 036 SP 014 048

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TITLE Some Critical Areas of Teacher/Advisory Groups and School Organization Development.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 10p.; For related document, see SP 014 050

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Guidance Programs; Educational Counseling; *Faculty Advisors; *Group Counseling; Group Dynamics; Learning Processes; Organizational Development; *Program Development; *Secondary Education; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

In establishing a secondary school teacher/advisor system and advisory group, the advisor should direct his efforts toward and encourage decisions about three critical areas: the state of the group and possible enabling norm patterns; the conditions of openness, trust, and safety in the group; and the student in relation to the group processes. The teacher/advisor's role is not the same as it is while teaching subject matter, for his/her attention in the advisory group must be directed to the group forces that are essential to the movement of the group and critical to each student's learning experience. The introduction of a teacher/advisor system in a high school can trigger an organized development effort in the high school as well, which can lead to a reappraisal of the total learning situation and the processes of interaction involved. (DS)

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SOME CRITICAL AREAS OF TEACHER/ADVISORY GROUPS AND SCHOOL ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

By
James B. Aiken

Southwest State University has made great strides in developing Teacher/Advisory Systems as a significant part of high school progress. Many T/A Systems are operating in Southwestern Minnesota. However, there is a difference between Teacher/Advisor System as it is practiced today and T/A System as it should be. The present level of operation could be improved.

Officials involved with the T/A program appear to be satisfied with the minimal elements of T/A programs. Early experimentation with the T/A Systems has shown that as little as possible is done on each of the four primary elements. This "inaction" is not intentional but is the usual by-product of being involved in a developmental process that is unfamiliar. T/A's are generally expected to have a high degree of human relations and Organization Development skills. T/A's are expected to initiate appropriate action after practicing schools have spent a minimal amount of time explaining "how" and most of that limited time in explaining "what" of T/A methodology.

Since T/A System is not just an administrative schedule change skill, but an understanding of people learning together in a school setting, it calls for leadership which is unusually skillful in tapping the effective energies of individuals and groups within the school. Incorporating a Teacher/Advisory plan is done in "community" with others.

T/A consists not simply of rules to be followed, but of goals to be defined, re-defined and achieved. For example, is today's concept of goals an end or a plan on paper

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imposed by an outsider? Or is a goal a pattern of individual and social forces to be ever redefined and achieved with an awareness of and a concern for a dynamic change of the sum of forces? Is it an ever continuing redefinition of goals by the people involved and widely shared? It is the assumption of this paper that it is the latter two. T/A system is also an attitude, a way of conceiving and helping human relationships and people patterns within and among groups in a school to become more effective and productive.

One way of describing a goal of the T/A System is: to build bridges between the world of human sciences and that of leaders in the practical enhancement of learning in high schools As forces surrounding this goal are assessed possible objectives could be identified to provide consultant help and training that hopefully will aid the leadership engaged in local school development efforts toward becoming more productive individually and as a group and school. Meeting sessions could be designed not to supplant but to supplement regular practices, processes, activities, projects, and to enhance the roles played in school development situations. The training emphasis could be pointed toward making for an improved intra and inter personal, group effectiveness. The hope would be to work toward a mutually arrived at taylor-made set of goals, objectives, and design. The school making decisions about its assessed problem situations, and the consultant makes decisions about his relationship to the school.

Once the Advisory group composition is established and the initial decisions about over-all policy have been made meetings begin. From this point on, by far the most important source of the Advisors influence is the manner in which he participates in the group. The advisor who seeks to move toward Organization Developmental goals through emphasizing and utilizing the mutually determined processes will direct his efforts toward

and encourage decisions about three critical areas — the state of the group and possible enabling norm patterns, the conditions of openness, trust, and safety in the group, and the student in relation to the group processes. These three components focus around the environment in which the advisor must work if he is to insure the maximum developmental milieu' and hence, a useful learning experience for each student in the group.

The kind of norm structure a group establishes affects the teacher and student's learning experience. If the norms are dominated by enabling decisions a wide range of group focal conflicts will emerge, maximizing the possibility that each person will experience significant personal learning in the developmental setting. In contrast, if the norms are marked by restrictive decisions, whole areas of experience, some specifically relevant to certain students, will be ruled out. Certain restrictive group decisions are to be especially avoided, since they have a hindering effect on some students.

Often group decisions permit a student to operate on a maladaptive havitual decision making premise. In effect the group norm is insulating that student from potentially useful and helpful experiences. Group decision may also expose a student to a threat, cause him to flee the group or to respond in some other ineffective or maladaptive way. The norms of the group are important in establishing conditions relevant to the development of personal insight and achievement corresponding to the achievement of group goals. It is important for the advisor to utilize his influence to encourage the establishment and maintenance of group norms which enable rather than restrict effecient group decisions. In pursueing this goal, a hazard to be avoided is the inadvertent support of a restrictive decision or interference with the establishment of an enabling decision.

Such errors are most likely to occur when the advisor is out of touch with the meaning of group events and/or when he loses the perspective appropriate to his new role.

If the advisor succeeds in these critical tasks, he will have maintained a developmental setting in which each student experiences significant personal conflicts, can avail himself of special sources of safety, can test the necessity for maintaining habitual ineffective decisions, and can utilize a variety of sources of information for developing insight. Simultaneously, the advisor will have avoided or forestalled potentially non-developmental experiences for specific students.

The advisor's tools for accomplishing these tasks are words and comments, as they affect the course of group events and individual group member experiences. Any intervention is many-faceted. An intervention may refer to any of the forces in the field of forces -- a compelling force, a repelling force, a modification, or to several of these. It may be directed to a student or to the group as a whole; it may be introduced purposefully or intuitively; and it may take the form of an interpretation, a question, a comment, or a personal reaction. The critical features of an intervention are the aspect of the group process to which the words refer and the timing and appropriatness of these words.

All interventions have an impact on the group processes. Their particular impact depends a great deal on the timing of the intervention. The moment at which an intervention is made can be described in terms of the immediately prevailing balance of forces among the elements of the current conflict. (Since all interventions involve changing group or individual perceptions, all interventions can be considered to be conflicts) Because an intervention occurs at specific points in the group's history and the group continually operates on a flexible norm base; the body of successful modifications forming its norm structure is always changing.

The primary task of the advisor group during the formative phase is the development of a group norm structure and the establishment of openness, trust, and safety. Interventions meant to be helpful sometimes block enabling decisions. During the formative phase interventions may inadvertently magnify the anxiety of the group.

The effect of an intervention directed at a decision in the group also depends on timing. If the advisor attempts to block a decision when it is still emerging, he is likely to be successful. However, if the advisor attempts to block or challenge a decision after it has been established, he is much less likely to be successful, for he has placed himself in the position of a controller and will experience all the consequences and effects of challenging rather than influencing group decision processes. Under such circumstances, it is more effective to focus on the group repelling forces rather than on the decision itself. Advisors can easily avoid serious errors if they base interventions on an understanding of group forces.

In general, the advisor is concerned with facilitating the group process. In so doing, he must take into account the dynamics of group processes, the experience and motivation of each student in the group, and the conditions under which student members may or may not progress. Attempting to influence and exploit developmental situation involves developing an awareness of the likely impact of interventions on group events and on the student experience. The Advisor's position and power in the group is a special case. From the student's point of view, the advisor is utilizing different and unique powers. Teh T/A's status as an expert in subject matter is enhanced as the advisor develops an expertise in human relations skills. During the early phases

of the group intervention students are likely to misunderstand the new or added dimensions of the T/A role. The issue of how much power the advisor exerts becomes critical as students become aware of power vs. powerlessness. The payoff for the T/A comes when students recognize the rewards and consequences for taking power over their own learning.

The T/A has a significant role in the advisory group, but it is not the same as his role while teaching subject matter. In the advisory group, the advisor's primary task is that of influencing the interpersonal conditions under which the developmental experience occurs and of exploiting the group situation appropriately for the benefit of each student. In this view, the advisor's role is conceptualized, in large part, as that of influencing the group situation. Some of the functions which belong primarily to the teacher in the classroom situation will, in the advisory situation, be assumed by the students. What remains the unique province of the advisor is attention to the group forces, for this is essential to the movement of the group, is unique role of the advisor, and makes a critical difference in each student's learning experience.

The students are encouraged to select much of their own subject matter, to participate in their own evaluation and to take responsibility for their own learning. The advisor is responsible for the learning situation and resources, for opportunities for discussion and for work that is cooperative as well as competitive, probably on an equal proportion of time. Work is done for present benefit of the student and the advisor utilizes simulations, roleplay, games, special mixes of students, media and so fourth. Inquiry and discovery or dilemma, invention, feedback approaches are utilized incorporating the affective learning dimensions.

The advisor is more concerned with people than with things; more here and now focus than there and then; more dependable than undependable; more helpful than hindering; more freeing than controlling; more revealing of self than concealing; more involved than uninvolved; more encouraging of independence and processes of learning than dependence. The advisor is sensitive to feelings and non-verbal cues, aware of strengths and assets of students, and helps to build feelings of trust, belonging, and safety as well as goal integration and enabling norms. The advisor helps the group to perceive group movement and meaning of transactions, to link attitudes, ideas, and feelings of students, to provide support by helping recognize non verbal students and developing listening skills for all students. The T/A system allows the advisor to give appropriate attention to all students without making specific judgements related to group decisions.

Most teachers believe that they accept each child as he is, value him for his idiocyncracies, relate to him as a unique human being, and stimulate his creativity and spontaneity. And many do do this to a high degree even with forces at work encouraging emphasis on learning of facts, following of directions, and acquiring "one correct answer." Once teachers are slowed down for a look at process they realize that they could more usefully value inquiry, discovery, independence, problem solving, and human relations. The advisory group not only allows but also encourages these dimensions. Most teachers see the advisory system as an opportunity for them to learn too. As students are encouraged in a "no fail" atmosphere, advisors also are encouraged to discuss their so-called failures so that they can learn with others in a mutual problem solving atmosphere. This safe in-house learning atmosphere is very important especially in view of the strong position

of a few of the parents and general public that have expected high school to be a place where one is controlled, forced to learn, and expected to suppress personal feelings and attitudes. This is also the view of some teachers and students especially during and immediately after some crises situation. These are normal reactions. Consultants can help advisors and students to understand the dynamics of such situations and deal with them in a positive and helpful way.

Actually the introduction of a Teacher/Advisor system in a high school can be a trigger for the beginning of an organized developmental effort in the high school. As high schools consider the adoption of the advisor system, they are encouraged to analyze themselves - administration, staff, teachers, parents, students. Why not analyze the total learning situation at the same time? Change can be approached with mutual respect, trust and goal allignment and build a desire to work together while serving individual needs of students and advisors. Included can be an analysis of problems and forces at work that keep the high school from functioning effectively. If this is accomplished by staff and student participation, they will thereby be more acceptant of commitment and responsibility and consequently become more involved in bringing about change. As each person takes personal responsibility for bringing about this change they become more willing to change personal attitudes, values, and goals, and become more capable and willing to look at themselves and the situation. This does imply being more fully aware of personal biases and private logic. It also helps to bring about equal rights and responsibilities for all who participate in decision making. With an atmosphere such as this educational goals can be described in specific terms and observed in behavior, attitudes

and performances of staff, students, administrators, and parents.

As the consultant helps with the organization development effort he can suggest processes for interaction on an equal basis among all concerned, a procedure for processing communication (formal and informal), and a systematic procedure for feedback. As he works with a goal of increasing interaction and learning in groups, he can help with carefully selecting groups for growth, increase interpersonal interaction and help develop enabling group norms, group expectations, and productive personal, social and organizational change behaviors and outcomes.